



# **TOWARDS MEANINGFUL ACTION**

NGOs' responses to threats from far-right  
authoritarianism

Jim Coe & Natasha Adams  
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# Purposes of this paper

The audience for this report is the UK NGO sector – including, but not exclusively, those registered as charities. The purposes are:

- 1/ To explore understanding of the threats that the growing power of far-right authoritarianism might pose to charitable and other objectives in the social change sector,
- 2/ To understand how NGOs are responding, what the blockages and challenges are to a meaningful response, and
- 3/ To make practical suggestions about how obstacles to a meaningful response could be best addressed.

*Findings are drawn from:*

- *a survey open to all working in – or closely linked to – NGOs with a turnover of >£100k pa. We received 55 completed responses. Around three quarters of respondents were from charities. There was an open invitation to complete the survey, though it was particularly targeted at campaigning NGOs and those who were themselves concerned about the threats arising from the growth of far-right authoritarianism.*
- *A follow-up roundtable discussion with a group of respondents who had completed the survey.*

This paper follows on from the [Meeting the Moment report](#), where we set out a broad analysis of threats to the social change sector from far-right authoritarianism and strategies we felt were needed in response.

Some feedback on that report showed that people were looking for simple advice about practical first steps. These will depend on individual NGOs' circumstances; but – whatever situation and stage of responding an NGO is at – we hope this paper contains some practical guidance about what would help organisations step up, as well as what the wider sector needs, to collectively move towards meaningful action.

We use the term 'far right' to refer to ethno-nationalist political parties, movements, groups etc. that are 'anti-system' and opposed to liberal democracy. We use the term 'authoritarianism' to describe political systems which reject plurality, and diminish and attack democratic norms and civil liberties.

# SUMMARY

## Context

The external context is having substantial negative effects on NGOs and the communities they work with.

The current and future threats from far-right authoritarianism are multifaceted (and interconnected), involving:

1. Power holders, including governments, adopting authoritarian positions and policies.
2. Power holders, including governments, adopting far right/ethno-nationalist positions and policies.
3. A rise in street fascism and racist hatred.
4. Power holders dominating public spheres with narratives that promote and normalise prejudice and discrimination.

The UK social change sector is facing a potential existential threat. However, the threat is currently showing up differently for different organisations, depending on:

- The extent to which the issue(s) the NGO exists to address, and the communities the NGO works with, are currently in the frontline of attack
- Organisational approaches to achieving change

- Charitable status, including whether or not NGOs are subject to Charity Law, and the actual / perceived parameters that places on action
- Positions amongst the communities the NGO works with, and its supporters
- Specific political contexts
- International, national, and/or locally rooted focus
- Organisational size, which can be a drag on action

## Responses

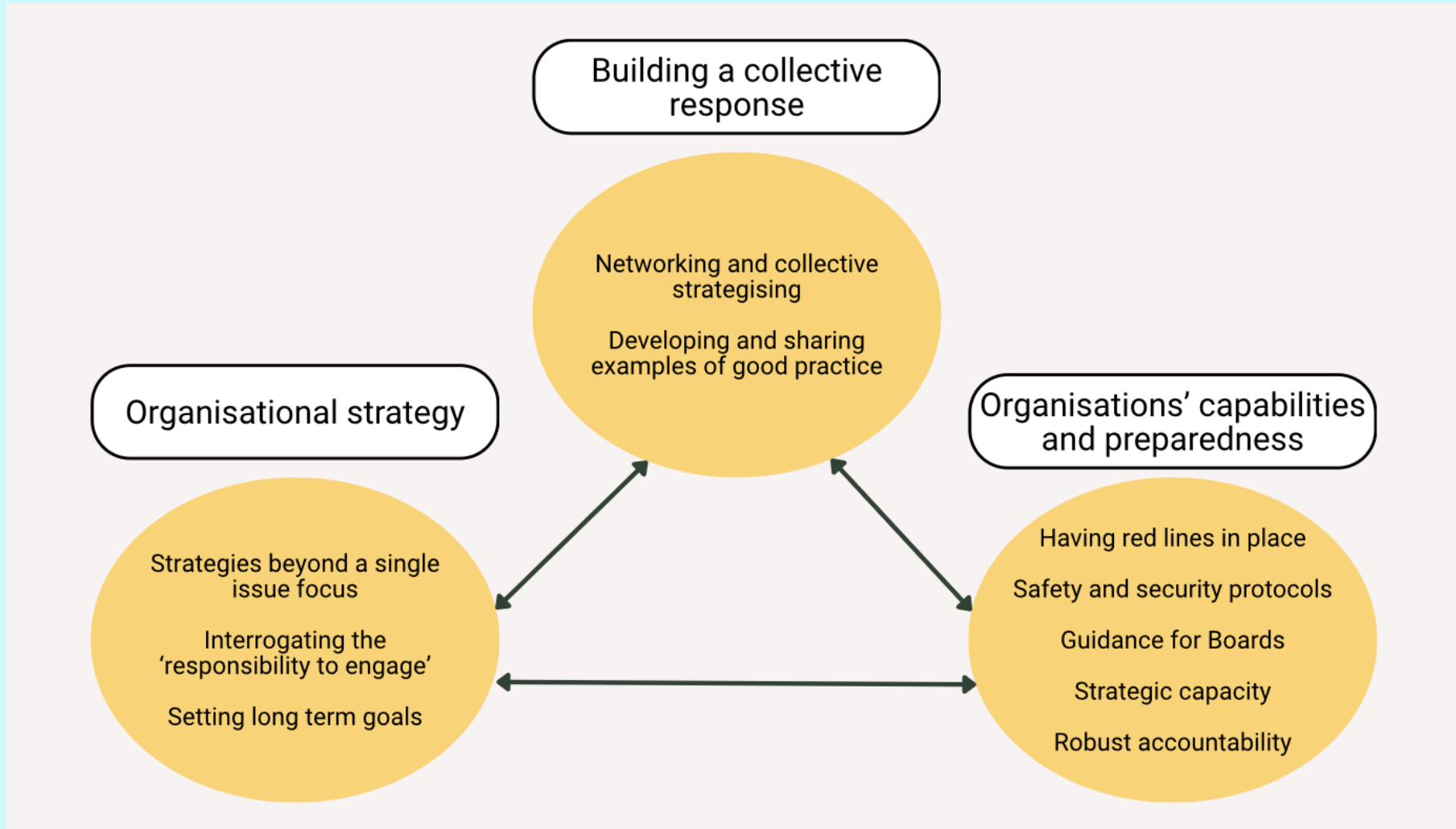
We are facing a clear threat, and yet there is a tendency towards timidity in response. (Lack of) (the right type of) funding is also a reported barrier.

The fact that the challenge is multifaceted and the effects are differential is complicating the response, making it hard to mobilise around simple responses.

However, there are things that can help different NGOs at different stages on the journey towards meaningful action:

# Towards meaningful action

Our findings suggest a need to take substantive steps across a range of areas:



These areas break down as follows:

Area		Headline finding	Action needed
<b>BUILDING A COLLECTIVE RESPONSE</b>	Networking and collective strategising	There is substantial interest in, and a recognised need for, connection, collaboration and partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expand opportunities for exchange of experiences and insights</li> <li>Foster relationships across issue and specialism siloes</li> <li>Develop more coordinated and joint action</li> </ul>
	Developing and sharing examples of good practice	Examples to help guide action are needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop and share examples from different contexts, including from other countries</li> </ul>
<b>ORGANISATIONS' CAPABILITIES AND PREPAREDNESS</b>	Having red lines in place	Clear red lines (for example relating to when and how to engage with decision makers) are not as prevalent as they would ideally be	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide guidance and support to encourage NGOs to adopt robust red lines</li> </ul>
	Safety and security protocols	Most NGOs have safety protocols in place, but a significant minority do not	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure robust protocols are in place for all who might need or benefit from them</li> </ul>
	Guidance for Boards	Boards are acting as a brake in some cases, more so for larger organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide tailored support to help Boards navigate the current context</li> </ul>
	Building strategic capacity	Organisations need expanded capacity to adapt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support NGOs to build their strategic capacity – with processes to gather intelligence, make decisions based on it, and to quickly and strategically adapt in response</li> <li>Develop (and utilise) scenario planning exercises</li> </ul>
	Robust accountability	Lack of robust accountability to affected communities may be limiting the scope and scale of the response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure NGOs have strong accountability mechanisms in place</li> </ul>
<b>ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGY</b>	Strategies beyond a single issue focus	There is strategic confusion about how to respond, particularly in relation to campaigning strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct some work exploring strategic options for (current and) future advocacy and campaigning</li> </ul>
	Interrogating the 'responsibility to engage'	A belief prevails that there is "responsibility to engage with decision-makers, whoever they are"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explore the notion of having responsibility to engage with decision makers, and the implications arising</li> <li>Give guidance on charitable constraints, and what it means to be non-partisan</li> </ul>
	Long term goals	There is a tendency to address symptoms rather than root causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest resources in addressing the deeper causes of the threat</li> </ul>

# Context

## The current context is having substantial negative effects on NGOs and the communities they work with

Around three quarters of respondents to the survey reported 'very significant negative effects' or 'some serious negative effects' to both the organisation's mission and the communities the organisation works with. This is fully consistent with findings elsewhere, for example from the [SMK Campaigners' survey](#) and from [NCVO's feedback from its members](#).

The problem we are facing is that a far-right, authoritarian political party is increasingly gaining access to power and could potentially form a future government, but also that the influence of the far-right is already permeating government and other policy, discourse, and spaces for influence.

People working across a wide range of issues reported being impacted by this current context - from migration and trans/non-binary justice, to climate policy, housing, human rights, global conflict, social cohesion and end-of-life care.

Many survey respondents mentioned impacts on the safety, security and wellbeing of staff and on communities – including attacks and verbal hate crimes, as well as the threat of violence. Effects cited also included:

- Increasing racism and Islamophobia
- Mission impacts of the rightward shift of discourse & policy,

- Fallouts from the hostile media environment, especially online
- Space for people, groups and organisations to participate in shaping society is shrinking.

All this is disempowering the groups most under threat:

*Some in our trans network are saying they cannot currently do the media work we support them to do.*

These wide and pervasive impacts are making it more difficult for NGOs to do their work:

*The move in political discourse to the right, has moved ... the "political will" to take on certain issues*

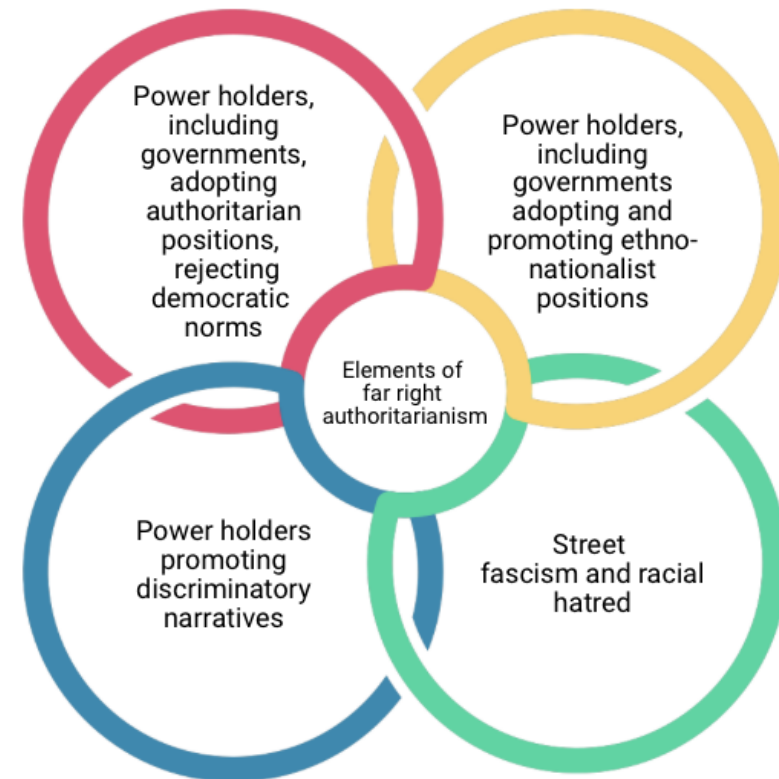
*The far-right are polarising people against progressive solution*

## The threats from far-right authoritarianism are multifaceted

The notion of 'far right authoritarianism' carries with it a series of interlinked threats:

1. Power holders, including governments, adopting **authoritarian positions and policies** – advancing a political system that rejects plurality, and reduces democracy and civil liberties.
2. Power holders, including governments, adopting **far right/ethno-nationalist positions and policies** – based on an ideology that claims to uphold the rights of those who are 'native born' over immigrants who are othered and blamed for societies' challenges. This ideological blame extends to other minorities such as trans people.
3. A rise in **street fascism and racist hatred**.
4. Power holders dominating public spheres with **narratives that promote and normalise prejudice and discrimination**.

*These things are not separate - they feed off each other. But it will help to be clear which threat(s) we are addressing, when, and how. It is worth noting that, although the current government has adopted some far-right and authoritarian-leaning policies, Reform's policy proposals and manifesto commitments are significantly more extreme.*



## We are facing a potential existential threat, but this shows up differently for different organisations

Over half of survey respondents saw the rise in far-right authoritarianism as representing an existential threat to their organisations - only around a fifth did not. But how the threat is currently being perceived seems to depend on variables, including:

How much that the issue(s) the NGO exists to address, & the communities the NGO works with, are currently under attack	Naturally, those working on issues or with communities who are at the forefront of attack (e.g. migration justice, trans rights and increasingly climate change) will be better attuned than those currently unaffected, or more tangentially impacted.
Organisational approaches to achieving change	Organisations that campaign and/or invest in organising are, and will be, affected differently to those who focus solely on service delivery. Those operating to a rights-based approach will have a different experience to those applying more of a charity lens.
Charitable status	For around a third of survey respondents working in charities, the belief that <i>“Charitable law around political impartiality prevents us from taking a position”</i> tended to prevail or was dominant - suggesting that beliefs about the limitations arising from Charity Law act as a damper, but not a blockage, to action.
Positions amongst the communities the NGO works with, and its supporters	For some, existing relationships are complicating decisions about how to respond:  <i>Some in the communities we work in are being radicalised and believe migrants/small boats/refugees are to blame for society's ills.</i>  <i>We ... have a supporter base, some of whom support far right political parties and are asking why we don't.</i>
Organisational size	Looking across survey answers, results suggest that larger NGOs may be less well equipped to respond meaningfully, as they are hampered by higher levels of internal disagreement and strategic uncertainty.
Specific political contexts	As the number of Reform-led councils and authorities grows, effects and choices are becoming more present for some, for reasons including implications for securing statutory funding.
International, national, and/or locally rooted	International organisations bring experience from other countries, which likely makes them more aware of the threats, if not necessarily more responsive to them in practice. Some (but obviously not all) national organisations are likely less to be directly connected to local communities, and so are feeling the effects less urgently, and less viscerally.

## (Lack of) (the right type of) funding is also a reported barrier

Survey respondents emphasised the need for more resources, and for funders to step up, and to operate differently:

*[There is an] urgent need for funders to step up and provide more, larger and more frequently disbursed grants to finance this work ... foundations ... need to get their act together and now.*

This was widely mentioned and so important to highlight; but it isn't new information. And rather than more reports saying that funders need to step up, what we actually need is more funders meaningfully responding.

Clearly, challenges around resourcing are pervasive – although survey results suggest that, if anything, smaller organisations seem more committed to stepping up than the biggest organisations (as judged by the list of additional areas respondents say they are planning to focus on in response to the threat). This finding is perhaps explained by the point in the table above: that bigger NGOs may be less well placed to respond, because of their complex internal dynamics.

## Despite the clear threat, cultures of timidity and reticence are holding organisations back

There is, perhaps naturally, a sense amongst some that the best way to continue to operate is to keep your head down. According to the survey, the notion that “the best way to avoid being dragged into ‘culture wars’ is to stay out of them” features to some extent in *most* internal discussions, for example. Numerous examples of this tendency were cited:

*There is nervousness within the organisation and our network about making clear assertions about the threat*

*Lots of hesitance around speaking up on certain issues.*

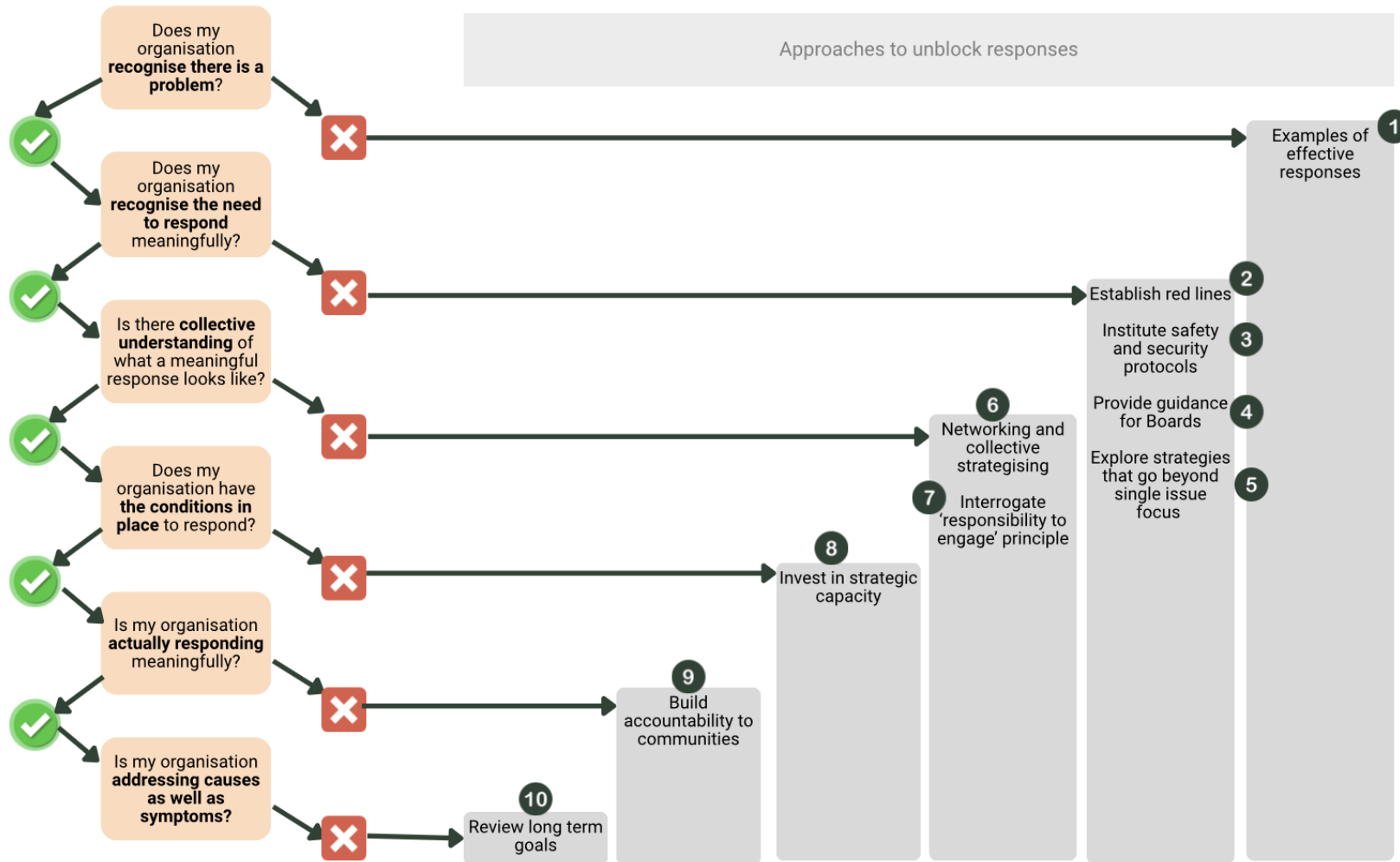
*A culture that prioritises comfort over conflict holds us back from doing better.*

However, being currently unaffected or distanced from the frontline of conflict is no guarantee of being cushioned against future effects.

Attacks on the [National Trust](#) and anti-vaxxers claiming a link between vaccines and autism are two examples amongst many of how positions and issues that should be uncontroversial can become enmeshed in controversy.

# Steps towards meaningful action

The fact that the challenge is multifaceted and the effects are differential is complicating the response, making it hard to mobilise around simple responses. The survey and roundtable do however point to a set of things that can help NGOs at different stages on the journey towards meaningful action. The diagram gives a summary picture of this and it is further outlined and explained below:



# 1

## Examples of effective responses

### Examples of good practice to help guide action are needed

There were various requests for more guidance and case studies on what a good response would look like, and having examples to build from, as well as other support, including around legal advice and narratives.

It will be important for organisations that are responding to share their thinking and practice with peers. This would ideally include examples from different contexts, including learning from experiences in other countries.

### What is already happening?

International democracy defenders D-Hub have just launched their [anti-authoritarian toolkit](#), filled with examples of successful tactics and strategies used to oppose authoritarianism and promote democracy around the world.

# 2

## Red lines

### Clear red lines are not as prevalent as they would ideally be

According to survey results, less than half of organisations have clear red lines in place to draw on in deciding how best to navigate current or future threats. These would likely include positions on when and how to engage with decision makers, and at what point

that might be determined to be no longer acceptable, as well as being clear what anti-racist policies and commitments to EDI mean in practice in the current context.

This seems like an important gap. In volatile and difficult times, having red lines in could be vital. Some strategic confusion around how best to respond is perhaps inevitable, given the set of complex choices and implications involved. But when faced with real time threats, it's better to be navigating ambiguity about what it means to best to adhere to a set of established principles than to still be confused at that point about what those principles should be.

This is consistent with what we are seeing in the US, for example, where organisations are much more likely to fold in response to pressure - or perceived, or anticipated, pressure - if clear positions haven't been pre-established.

## What is already happening?

Letesia Gibson's article '[Beyond Engage or Not](#)' is worth reading, and her organisation [New Ways](#) has been offering a [strategy clinic](#) supporting leaders to think through navigating when and how to engage with decision makers in alignment with anti-racist and EDI commitments.

# 3

## Safety and security protocols

### Most NGOs have safety protocols in place, but a significant minority do not

Survey findings make clear that security and safety are currently significant issues. But the survey results show that one quarter of organisations neither have safety protocols in place nor are planning to develop them. This seems risky given the current situation and possible futures (that can arrive quickly) and so renewed attention to ensuring robust protocols are in place would be good. There is much to consider here for safety and security of communities, staff and organisations in the frontline, including impacts on staff capacity through burnout, erosion of staff morale, and increased financial burden as set out in [Beyond the Emergency](#) by Li-En Yapp writing for Migration Exchange. But these obligations extend to all organisations to protect staff, trustees and volunteers who

are at increased risk such as visibly queer people, people of colour, Muslims and Jews – this argument is eloquently made in [Your Board Has a Duty of Care](#) by Anj Handa.

## What is already happening?

[Common Knowledge](#) has a Community Security Leadership Development Programme in development, website launching soon.

Civic Power Fund have collated this [list of useful resources for community security and resilience](#) – of these, the [Tactical Tech Holistic Security manual](#) provides excellent guidance to take a holistic approach to strategy in this space.

NGOs that have significant safety/security capacity will need to continue to be proactive in sharing their policies and practices with others.



## Guidance for Boards

### Boards are acting as a brake in some cases, more so for larger organisations

Around a third of survey respondents did not agree that their Board was taking the threat seriously. This rose to more than half for the biggest NGOs.

This points to a gap between Boards and staff in terms of how seriously the threat is being taken. And this is consistent with what we are hearing anecdotally, suggesting a continuing need to help Boards navigate the situation we are now in, for example by highlighting the strategic implications of the current context and exploring the risks of inaction versus action.

## What is already happening?

As far as we're aware there are no existing resources or projects addressing this issue. It would be useful to develop some work in

this area, and for Boards taking meaningful strategic responses to offer peer support and to share their experience and thinking.

Sharing Andrew Purkis' analysis on [what the Reform Party means for charities](#) may be a useful starting point.

# 5

## Strategies beyond a single-issue focus

### There is strategic confusion about how to respond, particularly in relation to campaigning strategy

Amongst survey respondents from the biggest organisations, more than two thirds agreed (or strongly agreed) that there is internal strategic confusion about how best to respond. Given this, there seems to be a tendency to carry on with traditional approaches, because that's how organisations are structured and where the investments have always been, and in the absence of clear alternative directions.

Survey respondents highlighted the current levels of strategic confusion relating to how (much) to adapt advocacy and influencing approaches given the new realities:

*[We need] a more sophisticated understanding of campaigning and advocacy.*

*We need ... a coherent and focused strategy that enables us to campaign on issues of importance while also focusing on the existential threat.*

As identified in '[Meeting the Moment](#)', traditional approaches (campaigning and advocacy focused on incremental policy progress on single issues) are decreasingly effective. The challenges we are facing aren't going to be overcome on an issue-by-issue basis - they are bigger than that. As movement actors learnt from their experiences in Hungary:

*Too much social justice infrastructure is locked into well-meaning programs to advance specific issues and policies. But these are*

*no ordinary times. To effectively confront movements and regimes that aim to break democracy and dominate institutions, we need to devote more resources and energy to building cross-issue and cross-constituency coalitions [with] a focus beyond specific issues to the larger struggle to protect and expand democracy and advance a vision of society that makes sense to regular people.<sup>1</sup>*

## What is already happening?

As far as we're aware, there are no existing resources or projects addressing this issue. Work to develop ideas about strategic options for (current and) future advocacy and campaigning would be useful. This also means addressing the incentives – including from funders - to continue to replicate existing practices.



# Networking and collective strategising

## There is substantial interest in collaboration and partnership

Survey responses reveal strong interest in collaboration and partnership working - including through coordinated and joint action.

Several respondents flagged the importance of practical solidarity, and the need for external encouragement (coaching, peer influence), with some citing the need for greater pan-sector leadership.

It's clear too that there are benefits arising from people coming together to explore their situations and learn from others – from inspiration on how to respond, to practical collaboration and active solidarity. This can improve collective strategic insight and bolster resilience & emotional support.

We need people to share their experiences with others in similar positions but also ensure there are cross-sectoral and more

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<sup>1</sup> <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/5-lessons-hungary-how-fight-authoritarians/>

heterogeneous exchanges of experiences and insights.

## What is already happening?

There are a variety of externally focused cross issue coalition initiatives making specific interventions (such as [A Million Acts of Hope](#) and the [Together Alliance](#)), and projects underway to convene inside issues / sectors (such as climate and nature, migration, human rights, unions and arts organisations).

Because more is needed, co-author of this paper Natasha Adams is fundraising for a project to build relationships and facilitate further collaborative action, and has started to host a network of existing convenors to connect different initiatives in the space.

# 7

## Interrogating the ‘responsibility to engage’

### A belief prevails that there is “responsibility to engage with decision-makers, whoever they are”

Over half of survey all respondents (and three quarters of those in the biggest organisations) said the responsibility to engage with all decision makers is a view that ‘dominates’ or ‘tends to prevail’ in their organisations.

*There is ... a culture of fear of being seen as party political if we don't work with far-right political actors in the same way we've worked with more 'mainstream' parties in the past.*

## What is already happening?

Law firm Bates-Wells produces [regular legal updates](#) for charities.

It would be good to explore this notion some more, and its practical implications, to ensure that positions that NGOs come to on this are well considered and not simply arrived at by default. This means being clear about the difference between being non-partisan and apolitical. For example, it is acceptable for charities to highlight policies and positions (including of specific political parties) which are directly at odds with their charitable objects.

# 8

## Strategic capacity

### Organisations need expanded capacity to adapt

Put simply, what we mean by strategic capacity is that organisations have:

- good intelligence,
- good decision-making capabilities in response to that intelligence, and
- the ability to adapt accordingly and promptly.

In relation to these three areas, those in larger organisations cited having better intelligence but being comparatively less effective in acting on it. But still most agreed that “My organisation is good at actually adapting its strategic approach in response to change” even within the biggest NGOs. This was a little surprising to us, as our own interpretation of NGOs’ capacities - and incapacities - to respond doesn’t fully align with this picture. However, it’s relevant too that fewer than one in five of the respondents from the biggest NGOs agreed that “My organisation is good at making hard choices between competing priorities”.

This is the current challenge facing many NGOs: a need to go beyond ‘business as usual’ and adapt to a radically different context in a time of increased need but constrained income, financial crises, restructures and redundancies.

Building strategic capacity should be a goal for all in these times. More work is needed to support organisations to ensure they are taking on appropriate levels of trustworthy information (avoiding overwhelm), and that their structures, cultures and practices facilitate timely decision making and adaptation in response.

Specifically, it would be helpful to better understand and bridge the gap between organisations holding an intellectual understanding that there is a challenge and those organisations then doing something meaningful about it.

## What is already happening?

Whilst we do not know of any projects focused on producing guidance and support to develop strategic capacity, this [article by Dr John Renouf on navigating uncertainty](#) may be useful.

Co-author of this paper Jim Coe has developed [a tool](#) to support strategic discussions around potential future scenarios.

Civic Power Fund and allies recently convened philanthropic funders in a large-scale scenario planning exercise. More use of this approach is needed to encourage wider action, maybe through 'pre-mortem' exercises (e.g., situating an organisation 18 months into a Reform government and looking back to consider what they wish they would have done earlier).



## Accountability flows

### Lack of robust accountability to affected communities may be limiting the scope and scale of the response

People in the survey were commenting on the effectiveness of their own organisations. However, there can be pitfalls in relying on internal judgements about the effectiveness of your own responses. A recent [survey of foundations in the US](#), for example, looking at how foundations have stepped up to the address the context there, found that:

*While 93 percent of foundation leaders believe their foundation has been effective in understanding the challenges their grantees are facing, only half of nonprofits report their funders have been effective in this way.*

And so it will be important that NGOs are able to draw on the experiences and insights of the grassroots organisations and

communities they work with in ensuring that their own organisational responses are effective. This means having strong accountability mechanisms, and being clear about the directions in which accountability flows - addressing contradictions arising from accountability upwards to a Board, or to power holders, versus down to a base.

And we know that these things aren't always in place within NGOs. As one survey respondent commented, for example:

*Leadership is far too embedded in the political status quo while at the same time not being effectively accountable to people with lived experience we're supposed to represent.*

## What is already happening?

Although there are (and have been) efforts at establishing some 'lived experience' leadership, through advisory panels, roles on Boards, commissioned research and more, we are not aware of significant efforts to shift accountability meaningfully towards communities or grassroots organisations (outside of organising projects and organisations set up this way from the start).

Potentially useful references include the [Collecting our Dues](#) report from Act Build Change and Love and Power (which makes the argument for finance from membership to bake in accountability to a base) and the [Grassroots Charter](#) from the Global Grassroots Support Network (setting out what is needed to ensure equitable relationships between NGOs/funders and grassroots groups).

# 10

## Setting long term goals

### There is a tendency to address symptoms rather than root causes

The survey results reveal widespread concern about the threats from mis- and disinformation and hostile communication environments.

But this is not matched by the extent of the actual or planned focus on working to rebalance the media eco-system and communications environment. And the future resilience of democratic institutions is also comparatively less of a focus.

This isn't surprising. These areas are more difficult to fit with mission and mandate, less immediate a concern, and less obviously solvable than some other things. But unless there is collectively greater attention to addressing the deeper causes of the threat - as well as the threat itself, and its effects - then we will end up stuck in a toxic holding pattern.

It's clear that we need meaningful action across multiple areas to extract ourselves from the situation we are now in. And that means thinking across timescales – anticipating likely threats, reacting to them as they emerge, and investing in approaches that help reduce future threats.

## **What is already happening?**

We are aware of some initiatives developing in this space (for example around the rule of law / democratic resilience, and the growing threats of billionaire / 'bro-ligarchical' tech), but more work and attention is needed to address longer term root causes.

The relational infrastructure project co-author Natasha Adams is working to establish would have a focus on convening around gaps like this, to encourage and incubate new collaborate projects to fill them (such as undermining the power bases of bad actors).